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Ethiopian Intellectual History and the Global

Käbbädä Mikael's Geographies of Belonging

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Abstract

Through the literary and historiographical works written by Ethiopian intellectual Käbbädä Mikael in the 1940s and 1950s, this article problematizes the concept of the "world" in world literature. In some theories of world literature, the world is presented as a static *a priori*, a self-evident spatial referent, a background setting for literary activities. Contrary to this objectivist frame, I propose instead to look at the world as a performative category, and to conceive world literature as a study of worldmaking processes. Käbbädä Mikael's worldmaking attempted to break into the Eurocentric exclusivity of hegemonic narratives of modernity, jostling for recognition within modernization theory but also, at the same time, activating polycentric connections along oblique South-South networks. For him, the world was not a cosmopolitan project, but a pool of symbolic resources from which to draw in building a better future for Ethiopia.

Keywords

Ethiopia – Amharic literature – worldmaking – geographies of belonging – significant geographies

1 Introduction

The career of Ethiopian intellectual Käbbädä Mikael (c. 1914–1998) stretched over decades in which Ethiopia's symbolic geographies shifted and were the object of intense debates. Before the Italian occupation (1936–1941), the Ethiopian educated intelligentsia drew confidence from Ethiopia's victory against Italy at the battle of Adwa (1896) and from their country's membership in the

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League of Nations. Ethiopia was lagging behind in terms of development, these intellectuals observed, but it belonged to the club of the great nations and could negotiate with European countries as an equal. The League's lack of support against the Fascist invasion in 1935 and the five years of Italian occupation questioned the validity of such a claim to equality. In the post-liberation period, Ethiopia's international position was more uncertain. This was both a political issue, as the political elites were forced to choose diplomatic alliances in the context of the Cold War, but also a cultural and symbolic problem, as Ethiopian intellectuals interrogated Ethiopia's role in world history and their own positionality on the international scene. Bahru Zewde has described the post-1941 period as characterized by a "drab intellectual climate" (*The Quest* 36), in contrast to the "intellectual vibrancy that prevailed in the 1920s" (*Pioneers* 211). This article will argue that, on the contrary, the disorientation of the post-liberation years initiated a symbolic and political remapping of Ethiopia's place in the world. Ethiopian intellectuals started testing the viability of different cultural and political worldscapes, and Käbbädä Mikael exemplifies the ways in which the generation that came to prominence after 1941 experimented with different geographies of belonging.

Born in Ankobär in 1914, Käbbädä[1] first attended a church school, becoming an expert of *ḳəne*.[2] At the age of nine, he was sent to the Catholic Mission School in Addis Abäba, and later studied French at the school of the Alliance Française. He was due to continue his studies in France, but the plan was disrupted by the 1935 Italian invasion. By the end of the Italian occupation in 1941 he was in his late twenties, fluent in three foreign languages – French, English and Italian – and eager to make his mark. He quickly rose through the civil service to become director-general of the Ministry of Education, a position that he held for five years (1956–1960). Around the same period, he also worked as director of the National Library and founded the Addis Abäba Archaeological Museum. Many of his works became school textbooks and were very well known by all those who attended school in the post-liberation decades. He is cited as a key source of inspiration by some of the most prominent Amharic writers of the time, including Haddis Alämayähu, Bərhanu Zärihun, Täsfaye Gässässä, Sahlä-Səllase Bərhanä-Maryam, and Daňňačč̌äw Wärḳu (Molvaer 150–51, 226, 292,

1 There are no surnames or family names in Ethiopia, and people are identified by their first name, followed by their father's first name. The bibliography lists Ethiopian authors according to their first name. Unless specified, the translations from Amharic, French and Italian are mine.

2 A poetic genre based on a two-layered "wax and gold" (*sämmənna wärḳ*) construction whereby a hidden "golden" meaning has to be found by melting the "waxy" surface of the words.

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326, and 368). For his literary accomplishments, he was awarded the Haylä Səllase I Prize for Amharic Literature in 1964.

In his works, Käbbädä repeatedly interrogates Ethiopia's cultural positionality, rethinking ideas of belonging and historical trajectories. My contention in this article is that an individual's conceptualization of space is not only based on physical geography, but also on the individual's own locally and historically constructed understanding of her own lifeworld, to use a concept central to Husserl's phenomenology. From this point of view, I question the objectivist underpinnings of recent scholarship on world literature (such as the work of the Warwick Research Collective), shifting the focus from macro historical processes of economic integration to concrete individuals and their own "significant geographies" (Laachir, Marzagora and Orsini).

2 World Literature as Worldmaking

The concept of "significant geographies" centers agents over impersonal "systems" or even more impersonal "laws." This entails conceiving the "world" not as an ontological category but a performative category. In the current theoretical canon of world literature, the "world" is generally considered a static *a priori*, a self-evident spatial referent, a setting for literary activities. Yet, there is no single way in which the "world" is understood. The lived experience of the world, and the way in which this experience has been theorized in scholarship, depends on historically contingent symbolic systems. The very same concept of the "world" became operational, Duncan Bell reminds us, when technological innovations made it possible to overcome geographical distance. The railway and the telegraph inaugurated "a new imaginative regime of global governance" (264) in which space could be used, tamed, and conquered. Imperialism itself was a "technology for the taking and (re)making of worlds" (261).

The "world" is in this case a socio-political project with a traceable genealogy. It is enabled by specific historical conjunctures and, to use a key term of Henri Lefebvre's theorization of space, it is produced. Lefebvre stresses how the production of space is a deeply political process, which also means that it is contested and antagonistic. In social struggles, as well as in identity formation more broadly, space is "a tool of thought and action" (Lefebvre 26). The way the "world" has been produced inside and outside the academy is also political, and this forces us to interrogate the theoretical and methodological premises of world literature as a discipline. Scholars have expressed reservations about the politics behind the "transnational turn" in the humanities and social sciences over the last two decades. Critics of world literature have observed that the

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discipline "parallels the ascendancy of neo-liberal capitalism and its attendant discourses" (Graham, Niblett, and Deckard 465). Objectivist and neopositivist methodologies in world literature hark back to the "epistemological regime" of neoliberalism, "in which positivist science [...] could provide fruitful theoretical models and, above all, predictive capacity regarding the social world" (Bell 268). By contrast, the relativist and pluralist perspectives that changed the humanities and social sciences in the late 1960s and 1970s offer methodological tools that can aid in avoiding the reproduction of neoliberal epistemologies and "neoimperialist cartographies" (Apter 583).

Within the discipline of geography, for example, positivist methods were heavily criticized by radical, feminist and humanistic geographers. Despite coming from different theoretical angles, these critiques shared a people-centred approach. Positivist geography treated people as an abstraction, as if they were rational thinking actors unaffected by history or ideology. Radical, feminist, and humanistic critiques, instead, stressed how everyday geographies are shaped by concrete individuals, with their often "irrational" and "illogical" choices, feelings, beliefs and values. These individuals are enmeshed in power relations and power struggles, and geography, it was argued, and had a role to play in dismantling oppressive structures and fighting for "spatial justice" (Soja).

Like some of these critiques, my framework is inspired by "existential phenomenology's account of the-person-in-the-world," which, in the context of transnational philosophy, "opens the way to a fresh consideration of the human or existential subject of history" (Doyle 1). This approach stresses "the importance of human activity, including intellectual and cultural activity, in creating the world" (Dirlik 396) and "treats the global as a native or actor's category – a concept that belongs to the archive and is itself the object of investigation, rather than as a meta-analytical category belonging to the investigator" (Moyn and Sartori 17). World literature would then become "both a site of processes of *worlding* and an agent that participates and intervenes in these processes" (Cheah 2). The study of world literature would interrogate different "world-making practices" (Bell 272), in which the "world" is a narrative, an aspiration, a goal that is constantly negotiated and contested. This view challenges the static description of the "world" as a stage on which literary circulation takes place and literary actors move – an inert background that is then described and reimagined in literary works. If the world is a product of human praxis, then many worlds are plausible, and we will only be able to glimpse partial, unstable, distorted bits and pieces of them. This ultimately means that the search for the "world" in "world literature" cannot but be open ended. Texts, authors, and language communities inhabit and fabricate geographies that matter to them

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(hence "significant"), and which "typically extend outwards without (ever?) having a truly global reach" (Laachir, Marzagora, and Orsini 294). Perhaps we have to conclude that the "world," in its multifarious contingency, is theoretically and practically unattainable.

3 Käbbädä's Geographies of Belonging

For Käbbädä, the "world" was a spatial potentiality to seize and experiment upon. Through his plays, poems and historiographical works, he was engaged in a conscious, if unsystematic, act of literary and political "worldmaking" (Goodman). Worldmaking can be enacted through different genres, and Käbbädä experimented across fiction and non-fiction. The epistemological distinction between Amharic textual categories, after all, had been codified just few decades before Käbbädä began publishing his works.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Amharic print culture was characterized by fluid genre boundaries. Knowledge was not rigidly compartmentalized in specialist sub-disciplines. Ethiopian intellectuals seamlessly moved between publishing novels and plays, drafting the Ethiopian constitution, and writing geography textbooks, treatises on agriculture, manuals of medicine and hygiene, or books of history and political economy. In the late 1910s, Ethiopian writers started discussing the relationship between Amharic genres and what Foucault has dubbed "regimes of truth" (12–13), progressively defining which kind of truth – transcendental, ethical, subjective or otherwise – should be expressed by which textual configuration. What truth should the historian pursue, for example, the moral truth of what is right and virtuous, as argued by Afäwärḳ Gäbrä-Iyyäsus, or the factual truth of what actually happened, as argued by Gäbrä-Həywät Baykädaň? These debates are consequential for how we define Amharic literature. If moral didacticism is what makes a text "true," then literary texts could be as truthful as histories, provided they both conveyed a "true" moral teaching.

By the time of Käbbädä's writing in the 1940s and 1950s, Amharic genre boundaries had become increasingly fixed and systematized. Käbbädä himself, however, continued to embody the model of the fully-rounded humanist intellectual equally at ease with poetry, theatre, historiography, and political theory. His non-fictional works politically and philosophically complement his fictional works, and textual synergies abound between them in both content and style. Käbbädä's role in world literature, from this point of view, goes hand in hand with his role in intellectual history at large, particularly if we want to capture the full extent of his worldmaking strategies.

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The "world" was not a globalist cosmopolitan endeavour for Käbbädä, but rather a strategy for particularist nation-building. His perspective was mediated by the nation, a nation on whose behalf he confidently claimed to speak. The global was for him an extension of his nationalism, an operative spatial concept that could be manipulated towards achieving certain material and symbolic gains. Ethiopia had been catapulted upon the modern world stage just a few decades before Käbbädä started his career, between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Such a planetary scale offered a dazzling and exciting potential for cultural, literary, and geopolitical alliances and affiliations. The geographies of belonging that Käbbädä tested for Ethiopia were not only pragmatic attempts at steering Emperor Haylä Səllase's foreign policy choices, although all of his works were always in dialogue with coeval political processes. Worldmaking was also, for Käbbädä, a philosophical attempt to break into the Eurocentric exclusivity of hegemonic narratives of modernity, jostling for recognition within modernization theory, but also simultaneously activating polycentric connections along oblique South-South networks.

The increased salience of the global as socio-political and philosophical category called, first and foremost, for an international positioning of Ethiopia within the fraught power relations of old European imperialism and new Cold War tensions. What did it mean to be "Ethiopian" in a rapidly-globalizing world, starkly divided, in Käbbädä's eyes, between colonized and colonizing nations? Käbbädä was acutely aware of the dangers of colonialism; the Italian occupation of Ethiopia had made the risk all the more real. The "West," a term he used with reference to Western European countries and the United States, was for Käbbädä a highly significant geography. Keenly concerned by the West's ascendancy, Käbbädä spent a good part of his oeuvre analysing what he perceived to be Ethiopia's development lag. He pushed back against modernization theory and Western racism, but his "world" was the result of a clear power differential and not the product of horizontal co-creation.

Some of the canonical theorists of world literature, such as Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova, describe this power differential through a centre/periphery model that stresses the centrality of colonialism in the transition of non-Western countries towards literary modernity. This explanatory framework offers diffusionism as a systemic explanation of literary globalization, effectively positing a strong correspondence between the unification of the politico-economic space and the unification of the literary space. Through colonialism, the argument goes, European literary innovations spread to non-Western peripheries, and non-Western authors started adopting them, at first clumsily, so that the first non-Western attempts at "modern genres" like the

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novel are always "unstable compromises" between "a foreign form and local materials" (Moretti 60). Diffusionist arguments such as Moretti's were heavily criticized in later scholarship on world literature, to the point that they have "practically [constituted] *the* main theme of 'world literature' debates in the last decade" (Ma 3). It is clear that diffusionist perspectives completely neglect "the worldmaking role of non-Western civilizations" and are ultimately Eurocentric (Ma 3). Ning Ma has proposed that we look instead at "horizontal continuities," that is to say, "transregional correspondences not necessarily related in themselves but allied through global factors" (Ma 4–5).

If we zoom in on Käbbädä as historical actor, do we get any sense that he was knowingly writing from a peripheral global position? Yes and no. He certainly did not consider Ethiopia a periphery, but did not envision a horizontal relationship of reciprocal co-constitution with the West either. Given the centrality of the centre-periphery debate in scholarship on world literature, the next section of this article addresses how Käbbädä conceptualized the relationship between Ethiopia and Europe – one of the geographies of belonging he pieced together, laden, just like all the others, with internal contradictions.

4 Ethiopia and the West in the History of Civilization

One such internal contradiction is the ambivalent way in which Käbbädä appraises modernization theory. His first major work on civilization, *Ityopyanna Məəhrabawi Səlәṭṭane* (*Ethiopia and Western Civilization*, 1948/49), is largely underpinned by a conception of societal progress based on successive stages of development. James De Lorenzi has argued that, in contrast with later works such as *YäAlam Tarik* (*History of the World*, 1955/56), Käbbädä's *Ityopyanna Məəhrabawi Səlәṭṭane* is an "Ethiopian version of a Hegelian story" (De Lorenzi 115), Eurocentric and teleological in character. For Käbbädä, Ethiopia lags behind the West along this path: "Ethiopia, in her present march towards a greater civilisation, [...] has not yet reached that evolutionary stage which produces the men of genius" (Käbbädä *Ityopyanna* 103). Geniuses are those *tallalaḳ säwočč* ("great men"), exceptional individuals whose talent and hard work creates civilization. The list of geniuses includes Socrates, Homer, Aeschylus, Virgil, Horace, Shakespeare, Milton, Michelangelo, Tasso, Corneille, Racine, Molière, Chopin, Spinoza, Newton, Beethoven, Mozart, Goethe, Schiller, Nietzsche, Pushkin, Galileo, Columbus, Leopardi.[3] Käbbädä's examples are all from

3 The same names appear in Käbbädä's collection of biographies of great men (and one woman, Cleopatra) in world history, *Talallaḳ Säwočč* (*Big Men*, 1954/55).

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European history, making it clear that the "Western civilization" of the title refers almost exclusively to ancient Greece, ancient Rome, Italy, France, Germany, Russia and Great Britain. This part of his argument would suggest that Käbbädä does indeed position Ethiopia at the periphery of a world-system in which Europe is the only engine of literary and scientific innovations.

Modern civilization did originate in Europe, Käbbädä states clearly, and became planetary in its reach thanks to technologies enabling spatial connectivity. Ethiopia was initially excluded from the increasingly intricate web of infrastructural connections. Her underdevelopment is to be blamed on the country's geographical seclusion from the nations that first pioneered modernization. Käbbädä opens his book precisely by decrying his country's historical isolation:

> Ethiopia, isolated from the world, to which the route was barred, existed for a long time in the impossibility of making contact with the modern world. It was only when the European states, thanks to the extension of their power and their civilization, dug the Suez Canal [...] that Ethiopia could establish contact with the other countries of the world.
>
> KÄBBÄDÄ *Ityopyanna* 1

This isolation hampered the country's march towards modernity, since there were no neighbouring countries from which modern ideas and technology could be transferred. In contrast with Ethiopia, Russia, which was "greatly backward in its modernization," benefited from its geographical proximity to Western Europe: "it was obvious that lying at the doors of Europe as it did, it would in the end achieve its modernization, sooner or later" (Käbbädä *Ityopyanna* 85). The argument is precisely about how the world became a horizon of possibility of international relations and intercultural flows. Probably referring to cultural exchanges and knowledge transfers within modern Europe, Käbbädä concludes that "a nation cannot be modernized by its own means, but only with the assistance of other nations" (*Ityopyanna* 88). The "global" only became operational for Ethiopia in the nineteenth century, and Käbbädä, like Duncan Bell above, stresses the role of infrastructure technologies in enabling this new scale.

Käbbädä points at Europe as the origin of modernity, but the way in which he theorizes the global power differential between West and non-West eschews a simplistic diffusionism. To start with, Käbbädä's acknowledgement of a developmental gap between Ethiopia and the West was not attached to any sense of Ethiopian cultural inferiority. He displays on the contrary a good degree of confidence in Ethiopia's cultural resources, maintaining that "Ethiopia, a millenary

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nation who maintained her independence in the worst misfortunes, never lost her greatness" (Käbbädä *Ityopyanna* 77). In his terminology, Ethiopia is a "small nation" compared to the "great nations" of the West, but this power differential is just the accidental result of an unfortunate series of historical and geographical circumstances. Western Europe is the place where such civilization has so far been realized, but there is no singular path to becoming modern. Human history has a general directionality, but its outcome is far from pre-established.

Käbbädä has a vision of history in which nations rise and fall all the time: the weak become powerful, the powerful decline, new nations ascend to the forefront of history, old empires are resurrected. There is not, in other words, a single story, although the historical ups and downs can still be classified according to stages of development. But from more advanced stages, a nation can slip back to less advanced ones, or rush forward overtaking its rivals, or slow down, as in the case of Ethiopia, due to an unfavourable geographical location. Käbbädä reads history through the gradual spreading of civilization, but he avoids rigid forms of determinism. The orientation of history towards modernity is not at all unilinear. There are always different factors at play, generating different outcomes, and setbacks are frequent.

Western civilization is, all in all, an imperfect form of civilization, and Ethiopians have to carefully scrutinize the Western model. There is much to be salvaged from the Ethiopian tradition, and it is important not to lose sight of Ethiopia's indigenous cultural resources. He elaborates:

> In order to maintain Ethiopia's independence, the Ethiopian people must work according to a noble spirit of emulation. Just like other nations, they must acquire more and more knowledge. There is no other way out. They must be careful, however, not to replace the noble qualities acquired by Ethiopia as a millenary and Christian nation [...] with vain and useless habits. Its qualities of wisdom, perseverance, respect towards its fellow-creatures, humanity, its military virtues, and above all its unbreakable faith in God. All these qualities that Ethiopians possess – difficult for other people to acquire – should not disappear or be destroyed. To preserve these qualities and foster them further is the main task incumbent upon the Ethiopian elite.
>
> KÄBBÄDÄ *Ityopyanna* 80

Steadfast in their Christian beliefs, Ethiopians are ethically superior to the West: "as for the Ethiopian people, granted that they have progressed less in material civilization, they keep abreast of the others and may be ahead of all of them when it comes to moral civilization" (Käbbädä *Ityopyanna* 97). Thanks to

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these moral qualities, Ethiopia has the possibility to create a *better* modernity than the one achieved by Western states (97).

The distinction between an "inner" and "outer" domain of civilization was a common feature of anti-colonial nationalisms, as Partha Chatterjee has observed. In his analysis, anticolonial movements in Asia and Africa claimed sovereignty over the spiritual realm well before beginning their battle for political independence. The spiritual domain is where the true and essential identity of the nation lies, and its distinctiveness has to be preserved against any foreign interference. The material is instead the domain of the "outside," of the economy, statecraft, science and technology. In this domain, the West is recognized as superior, and needs to be imitated (Chatterjee 217). Käbbädä allows us to extend Chatterjee's argument to countries that were not colonized, but still in a subordinated international position. Käbbädä sees Ethiopia's "outer" sovereignty as unaccomplished, even if his country has its own independent government. This is because Ethiopia is trapped in a cycle of economic dependency just like other Third World nations, whether colonized or not.

The countries that first achieved modernity are now actively trying to prevent the "small nations" from reaching that higher level of development, Käbbädä denounces. Therefore, small nations now face obstacles that the "great nations" who modernized first did not have to face. "Some countries realized their modernization in times favourable to them," Käbbädä reasons, "but Ethiopia came into contact with the modern world only recently, in an era of confusion, and her difficulties were hence increased and made more complicated" (*Ityopyanna* 83). When Western European nations civilized, they could do it in an international environment in which no one with a superior civilization attempted to conquer them. For Ethiopia and other small countries, the situation is different. The playing field is not equal, and weaker nations do not have the same possibilities of pursuing an autonomous and self-directed development. On the one hand, the great powers are "blaming us for not having modernized," and at the same time, they are "hampering our advance towards progress and trying to make us stumble" (*Ityopyanna* 77). It is in this context that Käbbädä brings up the second reason why Ethiopia lags behind the West: the geographical isolation that could have been overcome by the opening of the Suez Canal persisted due to the French, British and Italian occupation of the coastal areas of the Horn of Africa. The game is rigged, and Ethiopia is asked to "attain in few years the standard of modernization attained by its neighbours after four centuries of efforts" (*Ityopyanna* 78), or else be conquered. In a world in which one is either conquered or conqueror, modernization becomes a defensive, anti-imperial project.

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To sum up, in *Ityopyanna Məəhrabawi Səlәṭṭane* Käbbädä rejects the bipolar logic of a world dominated by colonialism, in which the territorial and political independence of the "small nations" is continuously under threat. The non-aligned movement had yet to be officially inaugurated, and at this stage Käbbädä was not particularly interested in the Soviet Union. From Addis Abäba, the West had a more urgent geographical salience. After the Italian occupation and surrounded by European colonies, for Käbbädä it was pressing to assert that Ethiopia was not a mere periphery. He refused to conceive the relationship between Europe and Ethiopia in vertical terms and built instead a plurilineal world of diagonal relationships. These diagonal relationships were based neither on a full identification nor a radical claim to difference. Käbbädä is never in full solidarity, but never in full antagonism either. Ethiopia might have been poorer and less powerful than Western nations, but it was not hierarchically subordinated to them. The connection with the West, from this point of view, was imagined as oblique: there is a power differential, but Ethiopia is not inferior and can go her own way, creating her own "world."

5 Classical and Biblical Landscapes

In his attempt to forge a polycentric world, Käbbädä had another significant geography at hand. Against European racism, Emperor Haylä Səllase had promoted a nationalist narrative celebrating the historical feats of his own "Solomonic" ruling dynasty. The Solomonic dynasty traced its origin to the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, whose story is narrated in the fourteenth-century *Kəbrä Nägäst* (The Glory of Kings). The *Kəbrä Nägäst* depicts a world in which Ethiopia is firmly at the centre of God's creation. After growing up in his mother's kingdom, Solomon and Sheba's son decided to visit his father in Jerusalem, and on his way back to Ethiopia he carried the Ark of the Covenant with him. Upon his arrival, the Ethiopians duly abandoned their traditional beliefs and converted to the new religion. State-sponsored nationalism drew heavily from the *Kəbrä Nägäst* and its geographies of belonging. Public discourses and school textbooks celebrated the kings, castles, and military victories of the age-old Ethiopian Empire. Ethiopia was praised as one of the oldest Christian nations, a nation that for centuries had been a hub of religious exchanges. To twentieth century Amharic writers, the *Kəbrä Nägäst* offered a powerful repertoire of influential literary themes and political and religious symbols (Marzagora).

The mythical connection between Solomon and Sheba, the verses of the Bible mentioning Ethiopia, the old Ethiopian monastic presence in Rome and

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Jerusalem, a thriving Christian manuscript culture – all these elements fed into a spiritual geography where Ethiopia occupied a prominent global position. The old links with the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East could be mobilized to show Ethiopia's pivotal role in the historical spread of Christianity. Ethiopia had been at the forefront of the theological mission to shape the world according to God's will. Käbbädä's first play, *YäTənbit Ḳäṭäro* (*Appointment with the Prophecy* 1945/46), firmly locates Ethiopia within the classical and biblical landscapes of the first centuries AD.

The play begins with an astrologist drawing a horoscope for his newly-born son. The pagan king arrives, and the astrologist prophesizes that the child will grow into a Christian, marry the king's daughter, and be crowned king. The king orders the baby killed, but unbeknownst to the king the baby survives and grows up among priests in a Christian church. Years later, a Christian priest visits the king, accompanied by the boy. Suspicious of the boy's identity, the king sends him to the governor with a letter asking the recipient to kill the carrier of the letter. The boy reaches the governor's house but falls asleep before handing over the letter, and is found by the king's daughter. Struck by the boy's beauty, she replaces the letter with another letter that orders the governor to immediately officiate a marriage between the princess and the messenger. Having read the second letter, the governor promptly proceeds to obey what he thinks are the king's orders. As the wedding celebrations take place, the unsuspecting king arrives at the governor's house. The daughter confesses that she is responsible for substituting the original letter, but at this point the king reassures her saying that it had all been prophesized many years before. Realising the power of God, he converts to Christianity, and all the other characters follow suit.

YäTənbit Ḳäṭäro has two obvious sources of inspiration. Ancient Greek theater is one of Käbbädä's sources for the trope of the prophecy that is fulfilled through the characters' attempts to defy it. And secondly, biblical stories of religious conversion were clearly at the back of Käbbädä's mind.[4] Käbbädä feels the need, in the Preface, to defend himself against possible accusations that he is validating astrology and other "superstitions." He struggles, it seems, to reconcile the two different literary geographies, classical and Christian. Astrology, he states defensively, was superseded by Christianity, but in antiquity people used to believe in it. The first reason for centering his plot around an astrologist's prophecy is therefore historical accuracy. Käbbädä is writing about pagan

4 The main reference is to the legend (in Acts 8) of the Ethiopian eunuch converting to Christianity.

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characters in the early phases of the spread of Christianity, and pagans used astrology and divination. To this, Käbbädä adds a second justification. The Christian God spoke to the men of antiquity through stars and animals, and from time to time also through pagan priests. It is the Christian God, therefore, that speaks through the astrologist in the plot as a way to communicate with ancient men. We cannot know whether *YäTənbit Ḳäṭäro*'s readers and theater audience found these two justifications convincing, but it is clear that Käbbädä perceived that his literary references, Greek theater and the Bible, sat uncomfortably alongside one another.

The *Kəbrä Nägäst* is another creative referent in Käbbädä's play. Prophecies abound in the *Kəbrä Nägäst*, predicting Ethiopia's future glories, and the same is true for *YäTənbit Ḳäṭäro*, which ends by reinstating the same ideas of Ethiopian chosenness and divinely ordained destiny. From the point of view of the plot, religious conversion is in both texts the result of the actions of a son who has grown up estranged from at least a part of his family. The *Kəbrä Nägäst* rule of Solomonic succession became a cornerstone of Ethiopia's monarchical ideology. From the fourteenth century onwards, Abyssinian emperors claimed legitimacy by demonstrating (or, in some cases, fabricating) Solomonic ancestry. In referencing and revamping, even if indirectly, elements of the Solomonic myth, Käbbädä legitimized and validated Haylä Səllase's rule.

Loyal to the throne, Käbbädä kept coming back in his writing to the geographies of early Christianity, geographies that were pivotal to how "Ethiopianness" was being defined by Haylä Səllase and the elites around him. These geographies were once again oblique, in the sense that they did not reflect any contemporary belonging, nor were they attempts to politically revive Orthodox Christian networks. They were rather past-oriented, the stuff of ancient deeds and legends, used to assert Ethiopia's divinely ordained agency. Käbbädä describes Ethiopia as a central agent in God's own worldmaking plan. Such Christianity-focused way of narrating global history is an example of what De Lorenzi calls "non-Eurocentric historicism" (63). On the one hand, Käbbädä activates this ancient Christian geography as a way of celebrating the Ethiopian monarchy. On the other, he mobilizes the narrative of Ethiopian historical exceptionalism against Western depictions of Africa as outside and devoid of history. Käbbädä's attempt at skirting Eurocentrism led him to other geographies of modernity, all the way to East Asia. Japan was for Käbbädä an excellent example of how different developmental trajectories could lead in the future to other possible worlds.

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6 The Japanese Model

In his second major book on civilization, *Japan Əndämən Säläṭṭänäčč* (*How Japan Achieved Civilization* 1953/54), Käbbädä teased out another significant geography for Ethiopia. Japan had already been hailed as a model for Ethiopia throughout the 1920s and 1930s, to the point that intellectuals active in those years are called the "Japanizers" (see Clarke, Bahru *Society*). For them, the most appealing trait of the Japanese paradigm was the possibilities it offered to reinvent the political significance of the monarchy by presenting it as the main driving agent of modernization. In other words, Japan offered an example of a successful top-down, monarchy-driven progress, and it was precisely this model that Ethiopian intellectuals sought to replicate in their own country. In the analysis of Ethiopian intellectuals, Japan had successfully hybridized Western modernity with local traditions and harmonized, in Käbbädä's terminology, "material civilization" and "moral civilization."

Ethiopia's growing diplomatic and economic relations with Japan culminated in 1931, when an Ethiopian delegation led by Həruy Wäldä-Səllase, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, visited Japan and met Emperor Hirohito. The rapprochement did not last long; Japan's alliance with Mussolini during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia erased Japan's appeal. From this point of view, the publication of Käbbädä's *Japan Əndämən Säläṭṭänäčč* in 1953/54 was oddly timed. One of the main rationales behind emulating Japan had been to reinforce Ethiopia's military and economic capacity in order to repulse external aggressions. The five years of Italian occupation had considerably eroded this confidence. Ethiopia's Japanophilia had peaked twenty years earlier, and after the 1941 liberation the Ethiopian ruling elites were looking to Britain and the US as the prime examples to follow. Käbbädä's geographical imagination, however, went beyond the straightjacket of Cold War alliances. "True" civilization had not yet been realized, after all, and the Western model was not wholly desirable. Even if it had been desirable, it would have been impossible to achieve, because of the inequality of the world-system. Still, the "world" was for Käbbädä open-ended, and the roads to modernity multiple. He saw value in the international geographies initiated by pre-1936 Japanizers and picked up the thread of their reflections as a way to circumvent the peripheralization of Ethiopia in the bipolar world of the Cold War.

A large part of *Japan Əndämən Säläṭṭänäčč* deals with the historical similarities between Ethiopia and Japan. They both had ancient ruling dynasties. They were both visited by the Portuguese roughly at the same time, and both reacted to Catholic evangelization attempts by forcing the Portuguese out of the country, justifying this as an act of safeguarding local tradition. After the Portuguese

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episode, both countries remained isolated from the external world for two centuries and a half. Käbbädä presents the Tokugawa Shogunate (1600–1868) as a period of decentralized political authority comparable to the Ethiopian *Zämänä Mäsafənt* (the "Age of the Princes," 1769–1855). In his reassertion of centralized imperial power, Meiji resembled Mənilək II. Under the guide of an enlightened monarchy, Japan went from a "small nation" to a "big nation," offering a compelling example for Ethiopia of modernization from above.

But while Käbbädä still believes in the viability of the Japanese model, his argument is affected by the growing pessimism of the 1950s. While pre-1936 Japanizers had imagined Ethiopia and Japan to be able to sit side by side in a horizontal association, Käbbädä's trajectories of belonging are again more oblique. Part of his pessimism has to be attributed to the imposing power of the West, and here Käbbädä restates his criticism of modernization theory. On the road to civilization, the already-developed countries make it hard for yet-to-develop ones to do the same. This is why non-developed countries should stand together, he adds, alluding to the possibility of non-alignment. Non-Western actors, though, are not at all imprisoned in their structural marginality, nor are they passive victims of Western dominance. Part of Käbbädä's pessimism places the blame on the Ethiopians themselves. This criticism is explicit in a passage that is unusual in its bitterness: "The reigns of Emperors Tewodros, Yohannes and Menelik have passed in vain," laments a disheartened Käbbädä, "if Ethiopia had worked hard [in the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s], she would have averted the recent Fascist invasion" (qtd. in Bahru *Society* 199).

Here lies the main difference between Ethiopia and Japan. Ethiopians have not yet been awakened from their indolence and languish in torpor, whereas in Japan all classes are committed to the hard work that is necessary for modernization. This is an argument that effectively treats the worldmaking agency of historical actors as total. And yet, Ethiopia and Japan have a valuable element of similarity. Japan had reached civilization through hard work, but this hard work was not aimed at individual success and gain. On the contrary, the Japanese worked in unity for the wellbeing of the nation. Ethiopia and Japan share the same cooperative ethos, in stark contrast with Western individualism. This was what allowed Japan to modernize so quickly. The West, in contrast, took centuries to reach civilization, because rampant individualism slowed down national progress.

Worldmaking, then, is not a personal affair but a collective bid for belonging, a transformative process of mass identity formation. Käbbädä reasons from the point of view of government elites and their nation-building project. Nation-making and worldmaking are for Käbbädä intimately connected: in order to understand the "world" it is necessary to first define who "we" are in the world.

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And we only know who "we" are if we reach a shared understanding of where we stand in the "world." The way in which Käbbädä repeatedly stresses the importance of national cohesion reveals that he was aware of, and concerned by, the centrifugal social forces at work in Ethiopia at the time. His calls for unity betray his unease at Ethiopia's domestic integration. The same uneasiness, as we shall see in the next section, surfaces in his play *Annibal*, composed around the same time. Here, nation-making is even more clearly linked to worldmaking: European colonial ambitions threatened to erode the Ethiopians' agency to forge worlds, and that agency could only be defended collectively.

7 Africa and Colonialism

Käbbädä's initial relation to Western colonialism contained several elements of ambiguity, as he famously started his career as a radio broadcaster for the Italian occupiers. His rise to positions of power in the post-liberation period has to be understood in the framework of the contentious move, on the part of Haylä Səllase, to avail himself of the skills of those who had served in the Italian administration. The Italian occupation of Ethiopia lurks behind Käbbädä's writings of the 1940s and 1950s. *Ityopyanna Məəhrabawi Səlәṭṭane* (*Ethiopia and Western civilization*), already discussed above, is perplexingly silent on European colonialism. Käbbädä does not show any moral or political objections to ancient, medieval and early modern empires, including, for example, the Spanish and Portuguese conquest of Central and South America, narrated without any reference to indigenous people. For the majority of the book, nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonialism is not mentioned, and the reader is left wondering about this significant omission, considering the book's focus on justice and conquest in international relations. Contemporary colonialism makes its appearance only a few pages before the end of *Ityopyanna*, in a crucial passage that resonates with dependency theory. "The colonies," Käbbädä denounces "have taken the place of slavery" in the global economic system (*Ityopyanna* 95). Slave labour fuelled the industrial revolution and was only abolished after the invention of machines able to perform the same tasks. Colonialism continued to fuel the industrial revolution by pillaging raw material from the colonies (95). This historical insight is not accompanied by the condemnation of colonialism we might expect. Rather, Käbbädä uses it to argue that Ethiopia's delay in abolishing slavery is not due to cultural backwardness but, more circumstantially, to the lack of mechanization.

Published eight years after liberation, *Ityopyanna Məəhrabawi Səlәṭṭane* is a long rebuttal of Italian propaganda about the persistence of slavery in Ethiopia.

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Käbbädä denounces the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, but not from an anti-colonial standpoint. The text does not hint at a common Ethiopian-African brotherhood. The arguments defending Ethiopia's independence and territorial integrity, on the contrary, seem to rest on exceptionalist claims. Ethiopia is a nation with a glorious past, and because of this glorious past it does not deserve to be colonized. "In ancient times," Käbbädä explains, "Ethiopia was crossing the seas, founding colonies, civilising other people, contributing largely to the progress of mankind" (*Ityopyanna* 78). By virtue of these historical achievements, Ethiopia has earned a seat at the table of the great nations and a right to be respected as a sovereign country. The reasoning is significant, since it relativizes Western dominance within a much longer framework, de-essentializing the power difference between Europe and Ethiopia. Käbbädä, though, does not address a fundamental question that arises from his reasoning. If a society cannot count on the same historical greatness as Ethiopia (however Käbbädä defines the concept), does it need or deserve to be colonized? Käbbädä's silence on the issue points to an ideological distance between Ethiopia and the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa.

The Italians had depicted Ethiopia as a savage land where people suffered under the barbaric yoke of slavery. Käbbädä attacks Italian propaganda by listing the obstacles Ethiopian emperors faced in trying to abolish slavery and the legal steps forward in this direction. He also describes how slaves in Ethiopia were compassionately cared for (*Ityopyanna* 58–71). The defensive tone of the argument suggests that the wounds inflicted by Italian propaganda were still open. Particularly insidious was the Fascist portrayal of Ethiopia as dominated by a rich Amhara landowning class exploiting and enslaving non-Amhara populations. This divide and rule propaganda was not wholly unsuccessful, since the Italians did manage to enlist the support of social groups disgruntled with Ethiopia's centralizing government. Insofar as it rebuts the narrative of the Italians, *Ityopyanna Məəhrabawi Səlәṭṭane* is a postcolonial text, speaking back to the former occupiers. At the same time, the text "belied a certain fear" (McClellan 61). The faultlines opened by the Italian occupation made evident that the pre-1936 nation-building process had been partial and ineffective and that Ethiopia was still disunited. As long as the divisions persisted, Käbbädä believed, Ethiopia remained vulnerable to external aggression. This is why *Ityopyanna Məəhrabawi Səlәṭṭane* makes an impassioned claim for cultural and linguistic assimilationism, stressing that Amharic ought to be the one and only language of the state.

Käbbädä's anxiety about internal unity takes central stage in *Annibal*, a verse-play performed at the newly-inaugurated Haylä Səllase I Theatre during the Silver Jubilee of 1955 and published in 1963/64. Hannibal loses to Scipio

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because the Carthaginian senate, bribed and manipulated by Hannon, a power-hungry senator who is jealous of Hannibal's fame, decides not to send more troops in Hannibal's support. Hannon enters the scene with a long monologue on the power of money, which "transforms the sluggard into a worker, the honest man into a rascal, the brave man into a coward" (Käbbädä *Annibal* 32–4). The play duly points out the need for people to rally behind their leader, and Käbbädä's main message is one of unity. Before dying, Hannibal encourages the audience to "teach everyone that the lack of union ruins a nation and dissolves a people [...] Without union a people dies" (91).

Alongside this conventional rhetoric, the play experiments with a new cartography of belonging. It taps into the classical imagination of Käbbädä's earlier plays but politicizes it in a new direction. Hannibal's fight against Rome alludes to Ethiopia's recent war with Italy, and Hannibal is presented, albeit indirectly, as the Haylä Səllase of the Carthaginians. Just as the Carthaginian ruling class was consumed by infighting and let their leader down, the Ethiopian leaders too were guilty of prioritizing personal gain over national interest. In the play, the fight between Rome and Carthage allegorically represents the competition between white Europeans and black Africans. This is made clear in the dialogue between two Carthaginians before the decisive battle at Zama between Roman and Carthaginian forces. One of the two characters explains:

> There is, moreover, the question of race and posterity. If the Romans are victorious, the whites will rule. They will possess all wealth and knowledge, and their power over the world will be eternal. They will guide the world. Europe will be the mistress of all nations. To her will go prosperity, science, and power. On the contrary, if Hannibal triumphs, then prosperity will change camps, leave Europe and come to Africa. If splendour, intelligence and grandeur are transferred to the other continent [i.e. Europe], this will lead to the decay of our [African] people. Think of it: this war between Rome and Carthage, this merciless struggle, does not concern the two cities only. The victory of one or the other side will decide the fate of the peoples of the world. If Rome resists successfully, she will be able to break the development of Africa and to block Africa's way to the future.
>
> English translation adapted from GÉRARD 325–26

This passage is significant because in the 1950s the Ethiopian political elites were reluctant to fully embrace the Pan-African and anti-colonial cause. It is only towards the end of the decade, and more proactively in the 1960s, that Ethiopia repositioned itself as the "biggest" of the "small" nations and as the

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"mother" of the newly-independent African countries. That Käbbädä in this play was proposing a paradigm shift in Ethiopia's self-identification has not gone unnoticed by critics. Plastow remarks that *Annibal* "is highly unusual, in that it emphasises the need for pan-Africanism at a time when the Amharas tended to see themselves as isolated from, and superior to, the majority of Africans" (Plastow 59). Gérard similarly thinks that "Kabbada's pronouncement signals the emergence, in creative writing, of a sense that Ethiopian patriotism was not enough, and that the fate of the country should be thought of in the framework of continental solidarity" (Gérard 326). Käbbädä's surefooted identification of Carthage/Ethiopia with black Africa questions decades of intellectual production characterizing Ethiopia as Europe's kith and kin. Instead, he dramatizes the power relation between Europe and Africa, boldly placing Ethiopia among the dominated, and depicts Europe no longer as a model to imitate but rather as a historic enemy to defeat. Perhaps tired of petitioning European countries for recognition, Käbbädä here gives shape to another world in which continental solidarity offers a politically viable alternative to European supremacy. The new geography of belonging, though, was not based on horizontal links, but as usual on oblique ones. The identification with Africa is only partial. Haylä Səllase in the play is the leader of all Africans. Ethiopia/Carthage is the "mother" of Pan-Africanism, leading her young "daughters" on the way to independence.

8 Conclusion

Throughout his works, Käbbädä Mikael experiments with different geographies of belonging, adjusting and fine-tuning his arguments on the basis of coeval events. Ethio-centric narratives inspired by Christianity were activated side-by-side with a call for Pan-Africanist militancy, and the contradictions between Ethiopian exceptionalism and anti-colonial solidarity were, for the most part, left unexplored. In some ways, Käbbädä was behind his times, Ethiopia's last intellectual defending the validity of the Japanese model two decades after the Japanophile fervour had lost momentum among Ethiopian elites. In others, he was ahead of his time, looking to Sub-Saharan Africa as a new source of political and symbolic belonging for Ethiopia. The West was a central concern for him, but he often displaced its centrality in his arguments and refused to define his positionality in peripheral terms. In his worldmaking, he refused to activate either vertical or horizontal geographies of belonging. Horizontal solidarity, with its implications of affinity and unity of intent, would have diluted Ethiopia's singularity. Vertical relationships would have implied

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dependency, submission, developmental delay, and would have closed the possibility for alternative futures. Käbbädä did not erase the power differential: Ethiopia is the "smallest" of the "big" Western nations, and the "biggest" of the "small" African nations. But he also strenuously defended Ethiopia's centrality and worked to create a future world in which this centrality could get a chance to assert itself.

Pierre Comba has defined Käbbädä as "the great promoter of Western culture in Ethiopia" (151), yet his appropriation of the European canon was always very selective. His Amharic rendition of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, departs so much from the original that critics were uncomfortable even defining it as an "adaptation." Even more, a good part of Käbbädä's career went into preserving and promoting local literary and cultural heritage, particularly for the newly literate classes. His first published work was the collection of folktales and short stories for children *Tarikənna Məssale* (*Stories and Parables* 1942/1943). Many of his works celebrate the great men of the past, prompting a younger writer, Sahlä-Səllase Bərhanä-Maryam, to remark that Käbbädä "loses himself in the midst of classicism ignoring the age he lives in. […] In his obsessive search for the great men of all time he tends to forget the small men around him." Despite the elitism of his political thought, Käbbädä's works are eminently accessible and written in a clear Amharic that sets him apart from many of his peers.

These contradictions are the product of a pragmatic, down-to-earth attitude to both the "world" and literary creation. If the 1960s were marked by a growing pessimism, Käbbädä's works of the 1940s and 1950s were still full of inventiveness, experimentation, and creativity. His investigations into the geographies of Ethiopia's cultural belonging were unresolved and inconclusive, incongruous and contradictory. The anti-systemic nature of Käbbädä's worldmaking experiments is what makes them so relevant for world literature. He was not inspired by a lofty ideal of cosmopolitan humanism; his point of view was stably national, and he looked at "outside" geographies in ways that were, for the most part, assimilationist and reductionist. The wholeness of the "global" was never his objective and he was not interested in making sense of geographical alterity *per se*. Against macro theories that search for a single, overarching explanation to transnational literary phenomena, Käbbädä's attitude to the world was practical and disenchanted. He was searching for what was useful in the *hic et nunc* of the Ethiopia of the 1940s and 1950s. For Käbbädä, the "world" was certainly not a given, but a problem to be faced via successive textual and intellectual journeys, and a pool of symbolic resources to draw from in the forging of a better future.

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